

The Role of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Contemporary Anti-Human Trafficking Discourse

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Abstract

According to various sources, 27 million people worldwide are enslaved, hundreds of thousands are trafficked across international borders, and each year 15,000 to 17,000 people are trafficked into the United States. In response, anti-trafficking activists, academics, and others have sought to use the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery to understand and combat this modern form of exploitation. The form of use varies: Either “the old slavery” is compared to “the new slavery” with respect to, for example, the egregiousness of abusive treatment of the enslaved, the level of interconnection of the phenomenon with the global economy, or the race or ethnicity of the victims in order to distinguish the new slavery from the old.

Often, the implicit hypothesis is that modern slavery is more widespread and awful, and involves more victims and, by extension, more human degradation than did the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Still others invoke the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery to assume a mantle of self-righteousness, and distance themselves, their political and economic system, their state and its efforts, from modern trafficking in human beings.

I claim that those who have invoked the trans-Atlantic slave trade have failed to explore it other than superficially, or to adequately map out the similarities and differences between the trans-Atlantic trade and human trafficking. As a consequence, the ability to effectively combat the modern traffic in human beings has been compromised both internationally and domestically. The analogy is underutilized as currently deployed because it does not illuminate the essential similarities or differences in the two forms of exploitation. Instead, the trans-Atlantic slave trade is too often invoked in appeals to emotions to serve particular ends of the user.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade can be relevant if explored more deeply – there are similarities not merely in individual plights but in the deeper structures of the world economic system and the factors that cause and foster the rise in human trafficking.